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3-2016

## The global rise of megacities

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### Citation

Singapore Management University. The global rise of megacities. (2016). Perspectives@SMU.

**Available at:** <https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/pers/193>

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# THE GLOBAL RISE OF MEGACITIES

Published:

30 Mar 2016



*By 2050, two out of three people on Earth will live in cities, many in megacities with over 10 million residents. Planning must be done today to manage inevitable infrastructural and social tensions*

According to the United Nations, Tokyo was the most populated city in the world in 2014 with nearly 38 million residents. Next on the list were Delhi in India (25 million) and Shanghai in China (23 million). Osaka notwithstanding, the cities that round out the Top 10 – Mexico City, Sao Paulo, Mumbai, Beijing, New York, Cairo – were all expected to grow.

While an ageing population shrinks Japanese cities, over a dozen urban centres worldwide have broken through the 10-million mark to join the ranks of megacities in the last two decades. China, which has six megacities, exemplifies what cities can do for economic development. But the accompanying issues of pollution and overcrowding need careful planning for a megacity's long-term viability.

"We have an urban population of about 1.6 billion people, and this is predicted to grow to 2.3 billion to 2025," says **Noeleen Heyzer**, former United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) from 2007 to 2014. "Every day, there will 120,000 new additions to our cities for the next 10 years. They'll require jobs, housing, services, leisure and so on.

"This has an effect on our ecological footprint. We consume about 67 percent of all energy usage, our cities emit 71 percent of all greenhouse gases emissions. We produce 300 million tons of solid waste every year. This means we have polluted waterways, polluted air, and congested roadways. On top of this, we actually contribute to climate change at an extreme rate."

## HOW BIG CAN MEGACITIES GET?

While urbanisation may appear inevitable, it will not go on indefinitely. **Stephen Cairns**, Programme Director at Future Cities Laboratory, observes that humankind is undergoing its steepest ever growth in urbanisation, but "that phase will flatten off and we will reach a new

equilibrium” once Africa completes the industrialisation process started by Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

But how much would megacities have grown by then?

“For me, the figure itself doesn’t matter,” Cairns said at the recent recording of a discussion panel for Singapore-based station Channel NewsAsia’s Perspectives programme “Urban Challenges in Asia’s megacities”. “The architects and planners on this panel feel that we have the skills and technology to manage and deliver those sorts of densities in the right configuration. We can all think of cities which are very, very dense and intelorable, and cities which are very, very dense but give you all the buzz that you are looking for.

“Mumbai (20.7 million people) is one of the most densely-populated cities on Earth but it delivers none of the excitement that the same density delivers in New York (18.6 million). It’s a provocative way to open the conversation, but it really comes down to the planning and governance of the city.”

**"I worry about the social fabric of cities." - Lily Kong, Provost, Singapore Management University**

For **Lily Kong**, Provost and the Lee Kong Chian Chair Professor of Social Sciences at Singapore Management University, not enough thought has been put into said planning.

“In some cities, there has been a ceding of responsibility by city governments saying, ‘We’ll privatise, let the private sector take care of these things.’ I think that’s wrong,” she emphasised. “Perhaps that belies my own background of coming from Singapore, which some people say is hyper-planned. Nevertheless, I believe in planning.

“But master planning without public engagement and community involvement risks a city without ownership, a city with a sense of alienation. I think public engagement is critical to making cities that work for people who actually live in them.”

## **SUSTAINING MEGACITIES AND SOCIAL FABRIC**

Kong argues that globalisation has changed the nature of urbanisation from an intra-national rural-urban movement of people to one that is truly global. When millions of people with different backgrounds and cultures come into contact with each other daily, managing social tensions become as important as providing for essential infrastructure such as housing and plumbing.

“I worry about the social fabric of cities,” Kong mused. “When we talk about city planning we tend to talk about physical planning. I don’t belittle the importance of that at all but because we pay attention to that dimension of urban planning most of the time, we let slip the other dimension which is the social sustainability of cities.

“Sometimes people even push back and say those are the things that cannot be planned or managed, and that it has to be organic. I believe in the organicity of that, but I also believe it is possible to put in place policy to try and ensure that cities are socially robust.”

That concern is reflected in rising tension in global cities worldwide. Paris banned Muslim street prayers in 2011 just months after outlawing the burqa, while a [U.K. report in 2013](#) found that low-skilled and destitute migrants were “disproportionately involved in crime like shoplifting and disorderly conduct”. Even in Singapore, questions were raised when a fatal traffic accident involving a migrant construction worker led to the island’s first full-blown riot in four decades in 2013.

Social tensions touch on issues such as urban poverty, which has risen as globalisation magnifies the gap between the haves and have-nots, alongside perennial bugbears such as overcrowding, congestion, and waste management. What can be done to address these issues?

“First of all, what type of urban future do we want?” asked Heyzer. “We need to think about an urban future that is productive for all because we do have urbanisation of poverty and inequalities. We need to make sure we have socially inclusive and just cities. We need to make sure they are environmentally sustainable, culturally vibrant as well as internationally and regionally connected.

“How do we reform urban governance to achieve this? With that range of issues and the complexities involved, we cannot just rely on the government or the private sector or civil society. We need to engage citizens. We need to make sure the government, the private sector, civil society and citizens come together to solve some of these problems.”

She concludes, “People can no longer be seen as beneficiaries of urbanisation, they need to be seen as agents of change.”

**Wong Heang Fine**, Group CEO of urban planning consultancy Surbana Jurong, puts it plainly: “I think, for us, we have to be prepared to change. For example, we like to take our cars. In the future, we may not have cars. We throw our rubbish now all in the same bag but, in future, we might have to separate our trash into different bags.

“The thing that individuals need to do is to be prepared for changes to our present lifestyles. If you are not prepared to change, going forward the world will be less acceptable. Our children will have to contend with more problems than what we have today.”

*Noeleen Heyzer, Stephen Cairns, Lily Kong, and Wong Heang Fine were part of a discussion panel, “Urban Challenges in Asia’s megacities” for the SMU-Channel NewsAsia programme Perspectives that was recorded at SMU Labs at Singapore Management University.*